

## *A Conversation with ...* **James Shoemake**

James Shoemake's career in funeral service began with his 1976 graduation from the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service. Four years later he returned to the college ... and never left. This month, Shoemake will retire as president of the Dallas Institute, a position he has held since 1992. On the eve of his retirement, he talks about funeral service, his long career and the future of the profession.

### **Tell us about yourself: Where did you grow up, and what did you do in school?**

I was born in Barranquilla, Colombia, the son of missionary parents. I grew up in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, where I graduated from high school. Consequently, I spoke Spanish before English. This proved to be beneficial with all the Latin terms used in the various science classes in mortuary school.

I moved to Dallas to attend Southern Methodist University where I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics in 1973. Following graduation, I took a position at the Christian Funeral Home in Decatur, Texas. This led to a desire to become a licensed member of the funeral profession. I started my internship in 1974 and commuted to Dallas in 1975 to attend the Dallas Institute of Mortuary Science (now Dallas Institute of Funeral Service), graduating in 1976.

While in Decatur, I went on to be named funeral director in charge of the Christian Funeral Home until I moved back to Dallas in 1978. Upon my return to Dallas, I was employed at Dallas Morticians Service where I served as manager and embalmer until I took a position at Dallas Institute in 1980.

### **Why did you join Dallas Institute of Funeral Service?**

I started in 1980, with an opportunity to teach my favorite subject, human anatomy. Having always enjoyed teaching others, I saw the opportunity to teach human anatomy as terrific. I also had the opportunity to teach public health, chemistry, funeral directing and small business management over the years. In 1981, I started graduate school at the University of Texas at Dallas, where I earned my master's degree in 1984.

### **How long have you have been a part of the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service?**

After serving as an instructor and administrative assistant to former President Robert Kite, I was named to be his successor in February 1992 and actually became president in December 1992. I have been president for 25 years now. I continued to teach until two years ago to spend more time mentoring and helping at not only Dallas Institute, but our other Pierce Colleges. I am retiring this month.

### **What made you choose higher education for your career path?**

I don't think it was a conscious choice I made but one which the opportunities presented themselves. I was fortunate enough to attend college in Dallas and then had my first real job working at a funeral home as a business manager. I had always wanted to go to graduate school, so when I started teaching, it became an opportunity to do both. From that point on, as they say, the rest is history.

## **You will be retiring this month. Can you tell us about your time at Dallas Institute and what you will miss the most?**

I remember fondly the early days back in 1980 when President Kite offered me the opportunity to teach my favorite subject, human anatomy. I replaced one of my favorite teachers, Norman Biggs. I am sure many of the students I taught in those early years did not give me much credit as a new teacher, but I consistently tried to emulate those who had taught me over the years, and I tried to use those principles that I enjoyed the most. Later I taught chemistry, funeral directing, small business management and even a term of accounting. The most satisfying was when I encountered graduates in the years following graduation when they would say, if not for Mr. Shoemake, I would never have passed chemistry or anatomy.

I am sure that I will miss the people I have taught, worked with, or met in my years at Dallas Institute. I have met people all across the U.S. and some foreign countries that also serve in funeral service. These will be missed most as I have met them through participation in the National Funeral Directors Association, the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards, and the American Board of Funeral Service Education.

## **What does it mean to be a funeral professional?**

I've always told my students that they should be the funeral professional they would want to care for their family member. They should be well prepared academically, should be up-to-date with trends in our profession, have a servant's attitude toward providing for the needs of the families we serve, and continually watch and learn from others.

## **Why is your role as president of Dallas Institute important?**

As president of Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, I have had the privilege of teaching, as well as being administrator of my alma mater. I

strongly believe it is very important to pass along the knowledge I received to others just beginning the learning process to be a good embalmer and funeral director.

## **From your perspective, what is it that makes the Dallas campus stand out, makes it special?**

I remember former students telling me before I attended Dallas Institute of Funeral Service that it was the 'Harvard of the Southwest.' I have tried to instill this attitude in our students and maintain a high level of academic excellence.



## **Which initiative that you've helped implement are you most proud of?**

I am most proud of the fact that funeral service education moved into the technological age, and we now offer funeral service education both on campus and online.

## **You've been successful at growing your new online programs. Tell us more about your online offerings.**

Our school is changing, the mode of delivery (of education) has evolved to the online offerings of not only our funeral director's certificate program, but now the Associate of Applied Science program is offered online. I see these programs as providing the opportunity to those who live too far away to attend school on campus.

## **What intrigues students about online learning?**

Most think it will be easier or shorter, but it puts much more responsibility on the student to be more disciplined. It does offer the opportunity they may not have if they must move or commute to school.

## **Is there any one experience that you can recall that shaped your philosophy on higher education?**

Consistency, integrity, compassion and a willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done. I have willingly worked many hours overtime and on weekends to accomplish a task originally assigned to another who failed to complete the task on deadline. They usually learn to follow through after one time of messing up.

## **What kind of teaching innovations have you implemented?**

When I was teaching regularly, I remembered what it was like when I was in the student's seat. I repeated many terms I was teaching by interpreting my own definitions and encourage the students to do the same. I also remember (and my graduates will attest) that I would illustrate the anatomical position by standing with my back to the board and saying, 'Imagine Mr. Shoemake plastered against the board.' I don't know how innovative any of these are, but I do have many graduates who will say, "If not for Mr. Shoemake, I would never have passed anatomy or chemistry."

## **What do you perceive as the most critical aspect of campus life, with respect to the college's academic mission?**

I believe the student's focus should be first to be successful as a student and then make time for self-gratifying activities. We can deprive ourselves for a time, but in the end, we would have accomplished something that will enable us to achieve all those other things.

## **Effecting change can be especially hard at colleges. What have you learned from**

### **your past experiences?**

I have learned that we need to have our ‘cheese’ moved occasionally, and that if we don’t have change occur, we may cease to exist. Frequently the ones with the greatest initial opposition can provide the incentive to change and will accept the changes before others.

### **What has been the best part of being a campus president?**

I’ve enjoyed meeting and knowing our students. They are like my own children, I grieve with them when they suffer or fail, I celebrate their accomplishments and I enjoy encountering them in the years after they finish school.

### **What issue in higher education troubles you?**

My biggest concern relating to higher education today is the continual interference by the federal government in how higher education takes place. I expect that fewer independent colleges and universities will exist in the future.

### **If you had to describe yourself to someone in just a sentence or two, what would you say?**

He is dedicated to the profession and to funeral service education. He loved to teach and found ways to promote others to learn.

### **Tell us about your family and what you enjoy doing when you aren’t working.**

When my son died of Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia just shy of his 20th birthday 16 years ago, my wife and I refocused our lives on serving others and consequently enjoy activities through our church like going on mission trips to the South Texas Rio Grande Valley. We both enjoy reading and taking the occasional trip.

### **What is a hidden talent, favorite hobby or little-known fact people don’t know about you?**

I speak Spanish fluently and help others learn English through an ESL

program at my church.

### **What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**

Do your best in whatever you do. You may not have the opportunity to fix it later. Do the job right the first time.

### **Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give your younger self?**

I would encourage a younger me to first be sure to get as much education as possible to be well-rounded in both the technical aspects of our profession as well as the business and psychological aspects. We must be sensitive to people and what they are experiencing. Always remember that you must treat people the way you would want to be treated, just follow the Golden Rule.

Even if cremation reaches the point at which few services require embalming, there will still be a need for good embalmers. Practice your art: embalming, restorative art and cosmetology; remember the results are what everyone sees.

### **What advice do you have for the funeral directors of tomorrow?**

It’s to remember that you are always being watched by the community in which you serve. They will all know who you are, and they will talk if they see you doing things that cause you to lose their respect.

### **How has funeral service changed during your 40-plus year career?**

Sure, the profession has changed since I began working in funeral service 42 years ago. Regulations, market trends, technology and clientele expectations have all changed significantly, which has changed the way funeral service is done. For example, we did not have the Federal Trade Commission’s Funeral Rule when I began, and cremation was a very small percentage of our market. Technology has really evolved, especially when you consider that back then we didn’t even have fax

machines, let alone computers or cell phones (we used pagers). Now, we can work around Little League games and still be in touch with our customers who call at odd hours. We can write obituaries and email or upload them to the newspaper.

As for clientele expectations, families are now much more focused on price and service. They also want personalization of funerals and that has become the norm. Subsequently, we must be more creative in providing services that families need or desire. Our profession still has the word service in it, and as such, we must never lose sight of what we do. We may not embalm as many cases as we once did, but if we do not provide the service aspect of our profession, then we have very little left to offer.

### **What will you be doing in your retirement?**

I do look forward to a more relaxed retirement seeking other ways to be involved in my community and maybe remotely with funeral service. I have volunteer opportunities that I expect will take up much of my time as well as involvement in my church and its ministries.

I have been told that more things will come along when others discover that I am retired.

### **Do funeral professionals really ever retire?**

I have been blessed with knowing fine old funeral directors who really never retired, and I have known those who did have the opportunity to retire and spend time with their family and grandchildren. I don’t think anyone ever retires completely mentally, but I expect to have a different perspective from the past years of funeral service education.

I do not have a retirement job in funeral service planned for myself. I do expect that in six months to a year from now, I will be looking for something that will help to fill my time – and I might consider something related to funeral service. •